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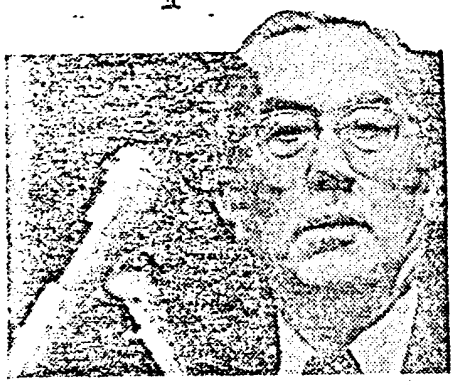
Theory and Practice:

A Diplomats' Debate, in the Shadow of Iran



Ex-CIA head William Colby.

By Boris Weintraub
Washington Star Staff Writer

It's one of those questions that confront all diplomats at some time, a nuts-and-bolts question that nonetheless spills over into the policy field — particularly at a time when the shadow of Iran looms so large.

The question is this: When you are a diplomat, do you maintain contact with the opposition to the established government in the country?

Simple, perhaps. But then the questions start to multiply, and take unusual twists and turns, and start doubling back on each other, and pretty soon, it becomes a very, very delicate matter:

How do you decide what is legitimate opposition and what is a kooky fringe? At what level should any contact be made? What do you do if you are serving in an authoritarian country that considers such contacts ground for grave displeasure? How do you make such contacts so as to get the proper information you need without making it seem that you are encouraging the opposition to expect U.S. support?

So when a covey of diplomatic practitioners who made up a very substantial segment of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment for the last three decades, as well as at least half a dozen foreign envoys to Washington, got together yesterday at Georgetown University in a sea of gray-flannel pinstripes to discuss the issue, it seemed not very simple at all.

They were brought together under the auspices of the relatively new Institute for the Study of Diplomacy of the Foreign Service, which is intended to raise questions like these, questions of diplomatic processes, diplomatic mechanics, rather than those in the policy area. But as the discussion proceeded, the policy questions were unavoidable. And, as it is almost everywhere these days, the Iranian spectre was present.

The panelists discussing the issue provide a fair index to the level of participants in the symposium. They included former CIA Director William Colby; former Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker; former Ambassador to the United Nations Charles Yost; Thomas L. Hughes, president of the Carnegie Endowment and a former diplomat; and John Wills Tuthill, former ambassador to, among other places, Brazil. (Henry Kissinger spoke in an afternoon session, but put his appearance totally off the record.)

Almost everyone agreed that American diplomats abroad should maintain some sort of contact with the opposition. But that was merely a starting point. Almost everyone provided horror stories of one sort of another designed to show that this is easier said than done, and that, even if good contacts are established, it may not mean a thing to the execution of American foreign policy.

"When I was serving in France in the 1950s," said Yost, a career diplomat, "some of us saw the probability that the government would fall and that Charles de Gaulle would come to power. We did our best to cultivate those around him. But the problem was a rift between the United States and de Gaulle going back before World War II. That created a resentment in the general's mind which plagued us later."

Hughes harkened back to his days as deputy chief of mission in London during 1969 and 1970, when a flap developed over whether the U.S. should close its consulate in Southern Rhodesia to protest the refusal of Rhodesian whites to share power with blacks.

As he described it, the American ambassador to London, Walter Annenberg, "spent most of his time refurbishing the embassy," which meant that dealing with the Labor government of Harold Wilson fell to the Conservatives. Meanwhile, the Conservative opposition of Edward Heath, which was about to depose the Labor government, was establishing its own secret contacts with Kissinger and his staff in the Nixon White House, which, in contrast to the policy of the State Department, was tilting in favor of the Ian Smith regime and "practicing benign neglect" toward black Africa.

In that jumbled context, said Hughes, who *was* the opposition?

Over and over again, the panelists and members of the audience, which included a large number of former high-ranking ambassadors and State Department officials past and present, complained that they knew of opposition to established regimes that were gaining strength in their countries and eventually took power. Again and again, they told of reporting this to Washington, but being ignored by policy-makers here for one frustrating reason or another.

"The problem may be that at home, at the highest levels, there is a predisposition to see the situation in a certain way, and a reluctance to move away from a particular policy," said Yost in quiet diplomatese.

Certainly, the most fervent arguments about contacts with the opposition were stirred up over the subject of Iran, where even former Ambassador Richard Helms, a career intelligence official, has conceded that the U.S. was the victim of an intelligence failure.

Helms, in an article written for an

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